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PROMISE WITHOUT PRESENCE:
A NEW APPROACH TO US GLOBAL COMMITMENTS

by

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Biography

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Abstract

Current US basing structure places American forces on every continent of the world. Proponents credit these missions with successful regional security, maintenance of enduring alliances, and an active role in securing US security interests. This sustained global presence, however, places US forces at deep risk and fails to meet US strategy. America jeopardizes more by extending its limited forces in piece-meal permanent global basing, risking destruction from powerful regional actors in major combat operations, and facilitating alliances dependent on US military presence. This article proposes an alternative to permanent US overseas basing that still meets US and allied security needs. By encouraging regional security through regional actors, repositioning US forces outside of lethal range from enemy systems, and eliminating permanent US global presence, the US will develop a renewed strategy that sustains its global hegemony while removing its greatest risks.

Introduction

US forces serve on every continent of the globe. Most of these missions involve permanent basing that requires established infrastructure, personnel, and foreign government permission to operate. This commitment to global presence suggests that permanent overseas presence properly supports US strategy. Unfortunately, this is not the case. This article will show that the US will glean more from a new approach to global presence as opposed to the status quo.

Currently, US global presence resembles that of a truly hegemonic power. Global commitments have caused the US military to divide the entire globe into areas of responsibility which it has assigned to assorted US military commands.¹ No other nation on the earth possesses such a significant presence or sense of global responsibility.²

This global approach produces many problems. On a practical level, the US must continue to serve these permanent global US security needs while it faces unsustainable decreases in funding, manning, and resources. Yet this global approach also holds additional strategic dilemmas. It encourages allies to rely on US presence for their own security. US basing often produces resentment among citizens across the globe. It places the US military at undue risk when one considers the capabilities that other nations possess the ability to regionally threaten US forces. Current global US basing fails to outweigh these risks. In order to reconcile its over-stretched global military, its global commitments, and its global risks, the US would best be served by phasing out its reliance on permanent overseas basing while trusting proven methods for sustaining its global pre-eminence.

¹ The entire globe has been split between USEUCOM (US European Command), USNORTHCOM (US North American Command), USSOUTHCOM (US South American Command), USAFRICOM (US Africa Command), USCENTCOM (US Central Command), and USPACCOM (US Pacific Command).

² No other nation has split up the globe in a similar fashion. Cynthia Watson, *Combatant Commands: Origins, Structure, and Engagements* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security International), 1-2.

Many benefits result from a reduced global presence. First, by employing permanent stateside basing, the DoD may focus on re-building and re-arming its military.³ Second, it removes the growing complaints about US global presence/hegemony. Third, positioning US military forces stateside removes the temptation of ill-advised military action and forces domestic debate on engaging US military forces overseas. Ultimately, by reducing US permanent overseas basing, the US will retain proven military capabilities, sustain regional security, and maintain its global dominance without the fruitless 'benefits' of global permanent presence. This new strategy forces the US into difficult, but necessary, strategic decisions regarding its global commitments, its willingness to use force, and the statement of a clear grand strategy for global affairs.

Literature and Approach

Prior academic literature has debated the role of global US presence. Whether described in the terms restraint, deep engagement, offshore balancer, defensive/offensive realism, retrenchment, etc., the debated role of global US presence is nothing new.⁴ This article, while echoing the larger arguments of Posen, Dueck, and Layne, attempts to apply a more practical approach to the faults in current US global permanent presence. By first explaining the failures of the status quo, other solutions will be analyzed before summarizing the benefits of a restrained global presence and the benefits it provides for US strategy and its allies.

³ The US Air Force and Navy have executed sustained combat operations since 1990 in Operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm, Northern and Southern Watch. This would equate to an unprecedented quarter century of sustained combat operations for two of the four major US military services.

⁴ See Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (United States: Princeton University Press, 2006), Christopher Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy," *International Security* 22, no. 1 (1997): 86, doi:10.2307/2539331, John J Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY: Norton, W. W. & Company, 2003), and Barry R Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (United States: Cornell University Press, 2014).

The Problem with the Status Quo

The current US presence across the globe presents growing problems for the US military. On a practical level, US global hegemony makes increased demands on its military and continues an over-extended framework of basing born in World War II and the Cold War. This worldwide presence often leads to foreign reaction against US actions and damages US efforts at international cooperation. More importantly though, US basing faces a real threat from growing adversarial military capabilities that place forward basing at risk. US forces may not survive the opening salvos of any conflict they were positioned to fight. These three problems make long-term strategic success difficult, if not impossible. The status quo produces more risks than benefits and the US must re-think its approach to global power in order to retain that very power.

First, on a practical level, the lack of manning, resources, and aging equipment are placing a tremendous burden on a thin military. The US military continues to suffer from diminishing budgets, manning, and resources as well as aging equipment and reduced re-capitalization, which equates to declining military capability. For example, the US military periodically implements the 'Stop Loss' policy which involuntarily extends the required service of military members.⁵ Congress approves reductions in military end strength for the services which exacerbate the problem.⁶

These reductions exacerbate other existing problems. The US Air Force operates its oldest fleet of aircraft in its history and the US Navy has retired ships to its lowest levels since

⁵ The 'Stop Loss' policy, used initially for continuous years, now experiences periodic implementation by any/all of the services dependent on global tasking, retention, and recruitment totals. Charles A. Henning, *U.S. Military Stop Loss Program: Key Questions and Answers* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2009), 1, and Stephen Losey, "Air Force invokes 'stop loss' in retirement change", *Air Force Times*, 12 October 2015, <http://www.airforcetimes.com/story/military/2015/10/12/air-force-invokes-stop-loss-in-retirement-change/73811682/>.

⁶ Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller) Chief Financial Officer, *United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Request* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2015), 1-1.

pre-WWII Levels.⁷ Since aging equipment increases in cost each day, the problems accelerate each moment this over-stretched position continues.⁸ The recent combat pace additionally stresses this already aged equipment.⁹ Therefore, the first issue with global commitments is the wear and tear it places on the current US military.

The antiquated structure of overseas basing is the second problem with the status quo. World War II and the Cold War provided the current framework of US global presence. For example, military installations in the United Kingdom, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Japan, Guam, and the Philippines all have World War II origins.¹⁰ US Presence in Korea, NATO basing and expanded alliances with nations (like Thailand and Singapore) attest to US overseas presence from the Cold War.¹¹

This structure stands as a microcosm of the US' over-stretched position. Bases represent a framework built upon last century's global struggle between ideologies and the associated funding, resources, manning, and infrastructure that came with it. Since 1991, this funding, resources, and manning vanished but over sixty commitments remain.¹² The US continues to live with the commitments, alliances, and constructs without an adjustment for the fiscal, strategic, economic and political realities that face it. Current global issues do not resemble the

⁷ Statement of Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James, in House of Representatives Appropriations Committee Testimony, 27 February, 2015, and Statement of Senator John McCain, "Senate Armed Services Committee Holds Hearing on the Navy Posture in Review of the Proposed Fiscal 2016 Defense Authorization," March 10, 2015.

⁸ Timothy L. Ramey and Edward G. Keating, *United States Air Force Aircraft Fleet Retention Trends: A Historical Analysis* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2009), 1.

⁹ Matt Kelley, "Wars Wearing Down Military Gear at Cost of About \$2 Billion a Month," USA Today, 29 November 2006.

¹⁰ Kent E. Calder, *Embattled Garrisons: Comparative Base Politics and American Globalism*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 13-16.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21-25.

¹² Michael Beckley, "The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Risks of US Defense Pacts," *International Security* 39, no. 4 (Spring 2015): 23.

bi-polar ideological battles of the 20th Century. If the US approach and structure does not change, it will increasingly fail to meet the security challenges of the 21st Century.

Third, most arguments for US global presence follow four main themes: US presence reassures its allies,¹³ US presence provides regional security,¹⁴ constant US presence guarantees US access to these locations during crises,¹⁵ and allies want US presence (as opposed to the US forcing itself upon its allies).¹⁶ These arguments contend that US presence must remain in order to retain US global strength and capability and to ensure fulfillment of obligations to its allies. The evidence, however, shows that US global presence has often outlived its welcome and fails to produce the benefits claimed.

First, US allies do not require permanent US presence in order to feel assurance of its commitments. The recent temporary deployments to the Baltics, the US European Reassurance Initiative, Partnership for Peace initiatives, and continuing military exercises all display evidence that the US intends to honor global commitments and maintain inter-operability without permanent presence.¹⁷ The US can demonstrate global commitment without permanent presence.

The claim that US presence ensures regional security cannot explain the disruptive events in Ukraine (by Russia) or Iraq (by ISIS) where US forces operated nearby while regional security crumbled.¹⁸ It also cannot explain China's push into the South China Sea or increasing demonstrations of power by North Korea or Iran. If anything, US permanent presence fuels

¹³ Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry and William C. Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home, America: The Case Against Retrenchment," *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Winter 2012/13), 39.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁶ Geir Lundestad, "Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945-1952," *Journal of Peace Research* 23, no. 3 (September 1986): 263.

¹⁷ "FACT SHEET: European Reassurance Initiative and Other U.S. Efforts in Support of NATO Allies and Partners," White House, 3 June 2014.

¹⁸ Michael Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York, NY: Regan Arts, 2015), 19.

regional conflict: Al Qaeda planned the 9/11 attacks in response to US presence in a region it 'secured.'¹⁹ These examples discount the claim that permanent US military presence provides for allied assurance and guaranteed regional security.

Likewise, claims that permanent global presence assures future military access overlooks the US' nimble ability to furnish global basing, wherever and whenever required, regardless of previous permanent basing. For example, in response to Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, the US secured the required basing independent of previous permanent outposts (e.g. Manas AB in Kyrgyzstan, routes through Pakistan to Afghanistan, or JTF-Bravo quickly gained access to Soto Cano AB in Honduras). This claim for permanent basing in order to assure future access also presumes that US relations with allies will always remain. The loss of basing rights after the overthrow of the Shah in Iran in 1979, the closure of Howard AFB in Panama, and the departure of US forces from the Philippines in 1991 show that permanent US basing provides little assurance of future access. The claim that permanent overseas US basing assures future access is overstated.

As well, claims that foreign governments want US presence overlook the domestic opposition that often exists overseas. US bases promote palpable objections in Japan, Korea, Italy, and the Middle East (among others).²⁰ Protests in strongly allied nations have caused US planners to move entire US permanent facilities and garrisons.²¹ If domestic issues force strong

¹⁹ Osama bin Laden, "Declaration of Jihad," and "To the Americans," in Bruce Lawrence, ed. and James Howarth, trans., *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 23-30, 160-172.

²⁰ Catherine A Lutz, ed., *The Bases of Empire: The Global Struggle against U.S. Military Posts* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 35, 67, 124, 147-151, 270-273.

²¹ Entire US bases in Japan and Korea (MCAS Futenma and Yongsan Post) are being moved as a result of domestic and economic demands. There are added efforts in Japan to move an entire Marine Expeditionary Unit – the very ground troops intended to be an assurance/security measure – to Guam and completely out of Japan. Calder, *Embattled Garrisons*, 4-5, 167-171, 206-7.

allies to remove US forces, then US bases in other nations that lack such strong attachment to the US are vulnerable to sustained public resentment.

As if this were not enough, an additional issue makes permanent forward-basing a clear risk. Forward-bases lack the survivability that make global presence worthwhile (or strategically sound). Historically, US forces could position themselves to attack targets yet remain outside the enemy's ability to interdict their presence.²² Unfortunately, recent advances in weapons technology eliminated this capability.²³ The US struggle with Anti-Access/Anti-Denial (A2AD) strategies underscores this problem. Missile capabilities have widened the 'battlefield' into intra-regional conflicts.²⁴ Formerly cutting-edge weapons – regional ballistic and cruise missiles in specific – are no longer property of only rich, advanced nations but have been proliferated globally. Even worse, the numbers of these missiles currently overwhelm any established anti-missile defense.²⁵ Therefore, the US strategically risks many of its highest-valued weapons systems in vulnerable forward-basing well within range of most regional opponents.

'Solutions' that Do Not Solve the Problem

The US cannot continue its current plan indefinitely. The increase in military requirements and missions fail to meet the decreasing resources, aging equipment, and thin forces. In order to solve this mismatch, the US must make several critical decisions. Two proposed solutions – a Reagan-era increase in defense spending or a move to an expeditionary

²² For example, airpower builds itself on the premise that aircraft can fuel, arm, and operate out of safe bases, strike targets, and recover without fear of enemy attack. Allied air operations in World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam, Desert Storm, Panama, Kosovo, Operations Northern Watch/Southern Watch, Afghanistan, Iraq, etc., all illustrate this point.

²³ Alan J. Vick, *Air Base Attacks and Defensive Counters*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation), 2015: 19-24.

²⁴ For example, Russia used cruise missiles in its opening attacks against ISIS. The US has not realistically confronted a threat like this since the Cold War. Arguably, even the Cold War maintained western advantages in technology and skill. That advantage is gone per Vick, *Air Base Attacks and Defensive Counters*, 63. Christopher P. Cavas, "Russian Submarine Hits Targets in Syria," *Defense News*, 9 December 2015, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/breaking-news/2015/12/08/submarine-russia-kalibr-caliber-cruise-missile-syria-kilo/76995346/>. Accessed 10 Dec 2015.

²⁵ Vick, *Air Base Attacks and Defensive Counters*, 63.

military – stand as two proposed solutions to this issue. Unfortunately, neither will prove successful in solving the problems facing US global military presence.

A Reagan-Era Style Increase

To meet increasing needs and global posture, the US could increase its defense budget heavily to re-arm the military, increase its end strength, and modernize its equipment similar to the Reagan era. After facing post-Vietnam manning reductions and the Carter defense budget, the military resembled the familiar over-stretched, under-funded, and poorly equipped position it currently holds. In reaction, Reagan drastically increased the DoD budget, especially since the Cold War strategy could not consider US retraction from permanent global basing.²⁶ Reagan's approach solved most of the issues facing the US military, re-enforced US global presence, and re-established US primacy around the globe.

Unfortunately, the current scenario will not support another Reagan-era increase. First, the Cold War justified this spending with a credible, existential nuclear opponent. Second, US politics would not support the same push for defense. Only 23% polled citizens favor increased military funding and the required support for a larger global US footprint.²⁷ Third, the required budget would exacerbate the current national debt which remains a larger concern among US voters.²⁸ Therefore, increasing the budget cannot continue as a viable solution to the current status quo.

An Expeditionary Military

²⁶ Amy Belasco, "Defense Spending and the Budget Control Act Limits," Congressional Research Service R44039 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 22 July, 2015), 18.

²⁷ Pew Research Center, *America's Place in the World 2013*, (Pew Research Center, 3 December 2013), 49.

²⁸ Pew Research Center, *Public's Policy Priorities Reflect Changing Conditions at Home and Abroad*, (Pew Research Center, 15 January 2015), 2.

In the face of resource, manning, and equipment shortfalls, the US military selected an expeditionary mindset as the option to maintain its permanent global presence.²⁹ By reducing permanent base manning and resource numbers, the presence remains but not at sustainable levels. For example, in Germany, only one fighter squadron remains at Spangdahlem AB. This intends to keep the base accessible and inter-operable but accepts the imbedded inefficiencies of keeping an entire base open for one squadron. Similarly, the military routinely deploys to places around the world – often to previously permanent bases – in order to maintain a sense of permanency. Deployments around the world (the Baltics, Romania, Hungary, Korea, Singapore, Alaska, and the Middle East) produce temporary visits intended to produce a permanent feel.³⁰ Similarly, the Navy must feign global presence with the smallest force since before World War II.³¹

The US cannot sustain this expeditionary strategy. First, this type of rapid deployment further aggravates the manning and equipment problems. Increased use, deployment, and maneuver increases fatigue on an already over-tasked military. Second, it stretches the existing forces thin as they deploy across a Cold War framework of basing. Third, it reduces regional security by removing many of the dedicated forces intended to assure US allies. Finally, this expeditionary plan makes US forces predictable enough for opponents to simply wait for an opportunity in which US forces commit themselves elsewhere or, worse, overwhelm an already thin US presence.

²⁹ The Cost Reduction Posture (CRP) and Global Response and Engagement (GREP) plans proposed by RAND. Lostumbo, Michael J., Michael J. McNerney, Eric Peltz, Derek Eaton, David R. Frelinger, Victoria A. Greenfield, John Halliday, et al. *Overseas Basing of U.S. Military Forces: An Assessment of Relative Costs and Strategic Benefits*. (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Project Air Force, 2013), xx-xxix.

³⁰ Lutz, *The Bases of Empire*, 5.

³¹ Statement of Senator John McCain, "Senate Armed Services Committee Holds Hearing on the Navy Posture in Review of the Proposed Fiscal 2016 Defense Authorization, "March 10, 2015.

In Defense of Retraction

This argument asserts that future US strength rests in reduced US global presence. This proposal extends past previous theoretical debates and elucidates the practical benefits of reduced global US military presence. Despite the following criticisms, the proposed thesis produces the best options for US strategy, clarifies US intent to its allies and opponents, and retains US military primacy for when it matters.

The Adjustment Will Take Time

An initial critique of this thesis asserts that the sudden withdrawal of US forces from global commitments fails to provide the required time for allies to ensure their own security. The critique states that allies will find themselves without constant US presence and without the self-sustaining military required to support their own interests. Yet history shows the transition proposed matches the timeline needed for allies to ensure their own security. During the Cold War, foreign base closures happened frequently and without sacrificing the overall security structure of the foreign country.³² After the Cold War, US reductions included large reductions in Europe and Asia without regional insecurity.³³ Each individual closure involves US and foreign national negotiation, thus the terms and timeline permit flexibility to ensure smooth assumption of security by the host-nation. After all, if the US can establish withdrawal dates for combat zones (as in Iraq and Afghanistan) without catastrophe, then a similar concept for non-combat and allied nations should occur with more ease and smooth coordination. Considering the long history of previous closures, the framework for successful reductions (US withdrawal with no reduction in regional security) already exists.

³² David S. Sorenson, *Military Base Closure: A Reference Handbook* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007), 115.

³³ *Ibid.*, 115.

This allotted time also permits allies to formalize their plan for any increase in infrastructure, weapons systems, and military structure required for their security. With US withdrawal, the infrastructure should already exist for basing. New weapons systems, purchasing, and acquisition do take time. Nevertheless, several allies have already established a successful plan to accomplish this concept. Turkey, South Korea, and several Middle Eastern nations formulated and executed plans for their national security.³⁴ In the meantime, the US will not abdicate its position of military primacy. It also will not abandon allies. That said, the overstretched position of the US military will not permit unending commitments overseas without allies assuming responsibility for their own security. Allies in western Europe, the Baltics, and Japan must begin the process of ensuring their own security without dependence on US presence.

Assurance for Our Allies

Critics against US military retraction assert that US presence assures allied security. The argument states that US allies need US presence in order to guarantee their security and that of the region. However, the permanent presence of US forces historically fails to fulfill this promise. In South Korea, where the US has dedicated thousands of troops to its defense over 60 years in dozens of permanent bases, North Korea still commits periodic attacks which violate South Korean security.³⁵ In Afghanistan, a sustained insurgency continues to threaten the government and destabilize the region despite active US defense of its security. Similarly, Iraq suffered years of violence with direct US presence. Simple presence does not equal security.

³⁴ US weapons manufacturers would benefit from any new nation searching for military weapons systems as well.

³⁵ It is worth noting that most of these attacks were answered by South Korean forces and not the US forces permanently based there. This further shows the strength in allied nations furnishing their own security and the weakened justification for permanent US forces in those regions. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), "Timeline: North Korean attacks", 1 April 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/10130248>.

The factor that guarantees allied security is US willingness to employ its overwhelming power on behalf of that ally, not permanent US presence. This is an important distinction: US presence does not guarantee security when compared to allied confidence that the US will employ its devastating power in defense of its allies. Where those forces originate remains transparent to the ally (i.e. whether US power comes from permanently forward-based forces or those coming from stateside bases); the guarantee of security through overwhelming US military power is what matters. In this case, the US' carrier-based capability, global airstrike ability, worldwide access by its air mobility, and its proven expeditionary capability provides the true assurance. If the US implements the retraction proposed here, these forces become even more formidable when re-built and re-charged.

US Presence Equals Strength and Victory

Critics of retraction also point to US military supremacy as the ultimate arbitrator in global conflict issues. In other words, this criticism asserts that allies want US presence in order to guarantee that the US risks its own forces in security matters. Any conflict will involve US forces directly and thus draw in the US as a whole. This argument avoids the practical issues facing permanently-based overseas US forces. As argued previously, significant US opponents possess large regional missile capabilities which would overwhelm US bases in Major Combat Operations (MCOs).³⁶ North Korea, Russia, China, and Iran all possess increasingly large quantities of missile technology that will decimate US permanent overseas bases and render US forward presence useless.³⁷ US basing certainly would risk US forces: risked to the point of destruction and uselessness for the conflict engaged. Although forward basing risks US forces, it also risks the very forces that provide for success in combat. If destroyed by the opposition,

³⁶ Vick, *Air Base Attacks and Defensive Counters*, 21-24.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 33-37.

victory in war becomes unsure at best. Thus, US-based forces will provide the maximum power available to ensure victory. By keeping key US forces stateside, the US eliminates the risk to those key assets and invests in them for subsequent successful combat operations.

The US Loses International Credibility without Global Presence

Critics of retraction argue that the US will lose international credibility with a reduction in overseas presence. However, the US already lost credibility through its previous decisions. The current US grand strategy lacks depth, specificity, forcefulness, and the predictability needed to ensure that allies and opponents alike understand US resolve in security matters. The invasion of Iraq, the wavering operations in Afghanistan, and the lack of follow-through against ‘red line’ threats after Syria employed chemical weapons all create foreign uncertainty about US intent. When the US intervened against Iraq in 1990-1991, it fought under the argument that nations could not ‘annex’ other sovereign nations. The Russian annexation of portions of Ukraine have received a completely different US reaction. In Libya, US forces helped overthrow Muammar Ghaddafi in order to stop his oppression of the Libyan people. Yet many examples exist of other national leaders – some US allies – who committed similar atrocities but received scant attention or condemnation (much less regime change). This ambiguous grand strategy and the inability to predict what will trigger US military action produces confusion and worry about US commitment to its alliances.

Any proposed retraction would have to augment a larger US grand strategy. The US could not execute this plan without a larger comprehensive approach to its overall global approach. Thus, this proposed thesis of retraction implies a larger US grand strategy which will remove the confusion regarding US intentions and urges for predictability in the use of force for its allies.

Promise without Presence: the Strengths in Retracting Permanent US Global Presence

The US faces an important crossroads. The US may continue its overwhelming global presence by exposing its forces to unwinnable fighting positions, accelerate the use and degeneration of its equipment, wear out its personnel, burn through the resources given to it, extend the overdrawn life of its weapons systems, and continue the operation of embattled outposts that incite anti-American sentiment and provide questionable benefits to the US global strategy. Or, the US can implement a plan of retraction that sustains US primacy, encourages allied empowerment, rebuilds US military power, focuses the US grand strategy, and provides a credible force for the US, its allies, and (most importantly) its opponents.

The retraction thesis extends beyond Barry Posen's 'restraint' argument.³⁸ My purpose is to provide a practical approach to US overseas basing and why it fits the needs for US strategy. Posen presents a very theoretical argument; this piece provides more pragmatic reasons for reduced global US military presence.

Initial arguments for overseas reductions typically point to financial savings. As far back as the 1950s, reduction in permanent overseas basing implied substantial financial savings.³⁹ Although reducing permanent basing will save money, these savings are not the main argument for retraction. For example, the US spends over \$10 billion a year to support permanent military presence overseas.⁴⁰ Considering a total Defense Department budget of \$580+ billion in FY

³⁸ Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 23.

³⁹ Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2012), 48-49.

⁴⁰ Senate, *Inquiry into US Costs and Allied Contributions to Support the US Military Presence Overseas*, 2013, 113th Cong., 1st sess., 2013, Report 113-12, i.

2016, \$10 billion is not that significant.⁴¹ The savings, while still a clear benefit, is not the primary reason for reduced global presence.

An even greater benefit of reduced global presence rests in reduced deployment for US military units. The benefits for US military personnel – already worn down from 14+ years of war – remain clear. These include improved morale as well as reduced divorces and family trauma, and depression and suicide issues.⁴² In addition, keeping resources at home decreases wear on deployable assets and permits re-apportionment of savings into re-building the force.

A reduced global US presence would have an even larger international impact. Limited US global basing would fortify allies' sovereignty, reduce claims of imperialism against the US, and encourage allies to undertake efforts to provide their own security. First, reduced US presence would lead to the restoration of allies' sense of sovereignty. Foreign governments and publics would not have to put up with US presence. The elimination of objections to US presence would also remove dangers for foreign-based US forces and resentment against US presence. Allied populations would have greater faith in their governments.⁴³ Second, reduced permanent presence removes the claim of US imperialism. Although the US should not adjust its grand strategy simply from fear of the 'imperial' title, the fact that imperialism and its associated connotations incite Al Qaeda, ISIS, and other international terrorist organizations must get serious consideration.⁴⁴ North Korea insists that US presence obstructs any prospect of national

⁴¹ Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller) Chief Financial Officer, *United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Request*, 1-5.

⁴² John Bateson, *The Last and Greatest Battle: Finding the Will, Commitment, and Strategy to End Military Suicides* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 238-241.

⁴³ C. T. Sandars, *America's Overseas Garrisons: The Leasehold Empire* (New York: NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 320-331, and Lutz, *The Bases of Empire*, 30-38.

⁴⁴ Osama bin Laden, "Declaration of Jihad" and "To the Americans", 3.

re-unification.⁴⁵ Thus, global fatigue from *Pax Americana* could fade with US global retraction.⁴⁶

Restraint and retraction will not occur overnight. Indeed, while they provide several beneficial shifts in global security, they also require long-term changes. First, redefining US global posture requires a long-term approach as already adapted in previous Base Realignment And Closures (BRAC).⁴⁷ As well, the timeline for retraction matches well with the required period needed for allies to begin ensuring their own security. The same time required for a BRAC-like process to occur mirrors the time allies would need to prepare for their own security.

The inertia required for this shift has already begun. Japan has ‘re-interpreted’ its constitution in order to relax the restrictions placed on its military.⁴⁸ This implies a willingness in Japan to assume a greater role in their own security. South Korea is preparing to assume command of forces during wartime.⁴⁹ Since the 1980s, proponents have proposed a military capability which would force European nations to organize, fund, and equip themselves without US protection.⁵⁰ These events signal allies ready to ensure their own security and voluntarily step out from the US global shadow.

⁴⁵ Tai Sung An, *North Korea: A Political Handbook* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1983), 89.

⁴⁶ Entire US bases in Japan and Korea (MCAS Futenma and Yongsan Post) are being moved as a result of domestic and economic demands. There are added efforts in Japan to move an entire Marine Expeditionary Unit – the very ground troops intended to be an assurance/security measure – to Guam and completely out of Japan. This becomes more significant when one considers that Japan remains one of the US’ strongest allies. If domestic issues force Japan to remove US forces, then the US must consider if similar resentment faces it across the rest of the globe.

⁴⁷ David. S. Sorenson, *Shutting Down the Cold War: The Politics of Military Base Closure* (New York, NY: St Martin’s Press, 1998), 58, 209.

⁴⁸ Anna Fifield, “Japan’s Cabinet Approves Bills to Loosen Post-War Military Restrictions,” *Washington Post*, 14 May 2015.

⁴⁹ Choe Sang-Hun, “US and South Korea Agree to Delay Shift in Wartime Command” *New York Times*, 24 October 2014.

⁵⁰ Geoffrey Lee Williams and Alan Lee Williams, *The European Defence Initiative: Europe’s Bid for Equality* (New York, NY: St Martin’s Press, 1986), 2.

Second, these new security rearrangements would produce nations able to ensure regional security (vice US global presence). The US holds few better allies than the members of the European Union, Japan, and Korea. Their self-provided security would counter-balance any threats to regional security (i.e. Russia, China, etc.) and alienate the requirement for constant US global presence.

Third, this strategic change removes the need to continually support or associate with unsavory regimes. Global presence requires that the US interact with regimes that otherwise run counter to US liberal values (such as Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Thailand, etc.).⁵¹ The only items forcing US relationships with these nations remains its insistence on global presence. Unfortunately, the ongoing relationship with unsavory regimes adds to the lack of US consistency in its strategy and fuel further resentment of US global military presence.

Ultimately, the reduction in global US presence permits a refocus on US grand strategy. Currently, the US lacks a cohesive standard for those international issues that require its military intervention. These haphazard operations then force relationships with nations the US otherwise would reject. US global presence permits – but does not require – interaction in every conflict. The seemingly random selection of US military interventions, unpredictable levels of military action, the limitations of an over-stretched and weary military unable to deal with every security dilemma, and the required support for otherwise unsavory allies produce a confused, shifting, and unpredictable US grand strategy.

Ultimately, the most practical reason for a change to US global basing is that permanent forward-based US forces cannot survive any major combat operation with a major regional adversary. They face almost certain destruction in any regional conflict as a result of the missile

⁵¹ Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy*, 35, and Barry Posen, “Pull Back: The Case for A Less Activist Foreign Policy” *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2013), 126.

threat. Military retraction removes this risk. In the case of non-major military operations, the US military has proven capable of deploying worldwide in short order with massive force. Thus, US permanent forward basing solves very little but risks much.

The Nuclear Question

Any discussion of US global presence must include consideration of US nuclear weapons. US nuclear capability, if managed properly, would provide an additional boost to regional and allied security. More importantly, it removes the need for extensive US global presence and adds to the case for US global restraint. US nuclear forces maintain a dominant global strike capability. The nuclear triad deters the most powerful peer competitors.⁵² It also underscores US superiority against any lesser opponent since the US may employ its nuclear forces with virtual impunity against all but a handful of nations.⁵³

US strategy relies heavily on its nuclear capability already.⁵⁴ Deterrence against widespread Russian advances in Europe, rapid Chinese expansion, as well as numerous US international pacts all imply US willingness to employ US nuclear power in order to protect its interests.⁵⁵ This helps to remove the need for constant forward presence of US forces.

For example, in Israel, the US does not permanently base its forces since Israel's survival relies heavily on US (and its own indigenous) nuclear capability. Israel's size, position in relation to opposing forces, and consistent threats from regional actors make it the ideal candidate for restraint critics to propose permanent US presence. However, its decision to fund and supply its own military, combined with the security of the nuclear umbrella, helps ensure its

⁵² David Holloway, "Deterrence, Preventive War, and Preemption," in George Bunn and Christopher F. Chyba, eds., *U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy: Confronting Today's Threats* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Inst. Press, 2006), 54-57.

⁵³ Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age* (United States: Cornell University Press, 2012), 139-142.

⁵⁴ Tom Scheber, "Contemporary Challenges for Extended Deterrence," in *Deterrence for the Twenty-First Century: 18-19 May 2009*, ed. Anthony C. Cain (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air Force Research Institute, 2009), 123.

⁵⁵ Scheber, *Deterrence for the Twenty-First Century: 18-19 May 2009*, 123.

own security. For nations across the globe (Japan, South Korea, etc.), Israel's approach should stand as an example of how permanent US military presence assures little. US allies will find true security by removing permanent US military presence and providing for their own security (all under the umbrella of US nuclear capability and credibility).

Conclusion

The US approaches a strategic crossroads. It can continue to overstretch its military, over-commit to its role as regional security guarantor, place its highest-valued military tools at risk, cement foreign distaste for its global presence, and risk its global primacy. Alternatively, it may reduce its foreign exposure, withdraw the threat of blooming missile threats to overseas bases, empower its allies to secure their own regions, and re-build its military at home.

The retraction of US forces does not imply a reduction in its military supremacy. History proves US ability to mobilize and project global power when required. Its conventional forces retain primacy over all others in their ability to provide US military power across the globe. That said, the US cannot restrict the rise of regional powers. China, Russia, India, and Iran (among others) continue to develop the ability to affect regional security. Currently, US global posture attempts to stifle that growth through presence. Unfortunately, US forward basing cannot prohibit Chinese or Russian empowerment simply through regional bases. Thus, allied nations must take responsibility for their own regional security.

The central issue surrounds the need for a well-defined US grand strategy that defines the essential interests of the United States. America jeopardizes its hegemonic position by extending its limited forces in piece-meal permanent global basing, risking destruction from powerful regional actors in major combat operations, as opposed to withdrawing and rebuilding for a future conflict. By placing its forces in perilous overseas ventures, the US exposes itself to a

massive re-structuring in global primacy and the fall from hegemony it worked so hard to establish. In order to support a successful US grand strategy, US forces and their vulnerabilities must be taken into account. US retraction removes the greatest risks to US primacy and supports its future positioning as a global leader without an associated permanent global presence.



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